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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 006903

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [IN](#) [NP](#) [BT](#)

SUBJECT: BHUTAN FEARS MAOISTS IN REFUGEE CAMPS

REF: A. NEW DELHI 5480

[1](#)B. KATHMANDU 1638

[1](#)C. KATHMANDU 1755

Classified By: Ambassador David C. Mulford for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Bhutanese MFA officials expressed concern over Maoist intrusions into refugee camps in Nepal and indicated the government's main priority is keeping radical elements out of Bhutan during August 24-25 meetings with Poloff and Econoff in Thimphu. The MFA reiterated the Royal Government of Bhutan's (RGOB) commitment to the Joint Verification Process, however they also signaled that it would be impossible to screen out refugees with Maoist sympathies. Government and UN interlocutors unanimously agreed that under no circumstances would the RGOB repeat the type of expulsions that occurred in the early 1990s, regardless of the results of the May 2005 census. The RGOB is issuing new identification cards to ethnic Nepalese, but No Objection Certificates (NOCs), needed for government jobs and higher education, are still being denied. Poloff informed the MFA that Nepalese Foreign Minister Ramesh Nath Pandey is open to meeting Foreign Minister Wangchuk to discuss the refugee issue, if requested. The MFA responded that they had not heard this and would forward the request to the Foreign Minister. (Note: Polcouns delivered this message to Bhutanese Ambassador Tshering in New Delhi on July 13 (Ref A) and it appears the message did not make it to the official to whom we spoke to in Thimphu. End Note.) The RGOB suggests that the two Kings meet at the next SAARC summit scheduled for November to discuss the refugee issue. End Summary.

The Red Scare

[1](#)2. (C) During four separate meetings with MFA officials over two days, the RGOB repeatedly expressed concern over Maoist infiltration into the refugee camps in Nepal and underlined the need to keep such ideology out of Bhutan. MFA Policy and Planning Under Secretary Karma Rinchen stated that the RGOB could not allow refugees who had been influenced by the Maoists to return. He reiterated Bhutanese fears that radical elements in the refugee population, if repatriated, would cause havoc and incite the type of violence that proceeded the expulsions of the early 1990s. When asked if there would be a way to screen out refugees involved in the Maoist insurgency, which the would have RGOB confidence, he responded, "how can you screen for people's thoughts?" Rinchen commented that the recent attempt by refugees to return to Bhutan (Refs B and C), were organized by the Human Rights Organization of Bhutan (HUROB) and the Bhutan Gorkha National Liberation Front (BGNLF). He noted that he had only recently heard of the BGNLF and questioned whether it had Maoist ties. There is no Gorkhaland in Bhutan, according to Rinchen, and the attempt to associate the Gorkha movement with "the people in the camps" was troubling.

[1](#)3. (C) MFA Under Secretary Chitem Tenzin also told us that the RGOB is worried about Maoist infiltration into Bhutan. He asserted that the Bhutanese are desperately attempting to save their heritage and culture, and are worried that the Maoists would try and destroy this history. He acknowledged that the refugee situation was most regrettable and the government was struggling with how to deal with the problem. He also reiterated RGOB beliefs that the refugee numbers being quoted in the press are much higher than the actual number of Bhutanese, and that many of the residents of the camps are actually Nepali and Indian citizens.

Committed to the Repatriation Process?

[1](#)4. (C) MFA's Rinchen told us the RGOB will abide by its commitments made under the Bhutan/Nepal Joint Ministerial meetings and that his government was not backing away from prior agreements. MFA Under Secretary (Multilateral) Tenzin Wangchuk also asserted that the RGOB would not back away from the accords made regarding the refugees, particularly the agreement to repatriate Category 1 refugees from the Khudunabari camp. Tenzin reiterated that the RGOB would not resist taking back Category 1 refugees, but that they were waiting for the GON to respond to their overtures for meetings.

[1](#)5. (C) Resident Representative for UNDP Renata Lok

Dessallien, a senior and knowledgeable resident diplomat, told us that it is unlikely the RGOB will backtrack on the agreement to repatriate Category 1 refugees. She said that the Bhutanese often take a long time to make a decision, because it must be by consensus, but that once a decision has been made they carry it through. However, she acknowledged that the Bhutanese -- the people and the government -- feel very vulnerable politically at this time and may postpone any action on the refugees until after the constitution is adopted and a new government elected. She concluded that in the end, it is unlikely that large numbers of refugees will ever return to Bhutan and that the international community should immediately focus its efforts on third country resettlement.

Mass Expulsions: Never Again

16. (C) Government officials, UN contacts and international aid workers unanimously agreed that the RGOB would not repeat the expulsions of the early 1990s. Ministry of Information and Communications Secretary Tashi Phuntsog told us in confidence that a friend in the census bureau said the new populations figures would be lower than current estimates, and could "be in the 600,000 range." However, interlocutors asserted that lower population figures will not presage a recurrence of expulsion of "non-Bhutanese." Austrian Coordination Bureau Program Manager Ramesh Chhetri told Poloff that there are many positive developments in southern Bhutan, which point to an acceptance of the ethnic Nepali populations there. He noted that, starting in February 2005, the Government began issuing new identity cards to ethnic Nepalese, giving them status as genuine Bhutanese, which was a marked change in policy. Chhetri, who is an ethnically Nepali Hindu and travels to the south often, commented that "a large majority, likely over 90 percent, of ethnic Nepalese" meet the citizenship qualifications to be genuine Bhutanese and will receive the ID cards. He noted that most of the others would fall into one of the other categories of citizenship and that the government would not evict them. He reported he had not heard of any Nepali-origin Bhutanese being denied cards by the government since February. He opined that this change in policy was timed to occur before the implementation of the constitution, ensuring the minority Hindu population currently living in Bhutan would be included in the process.

17. (C) Chhetri acknowledged that discrimination against the ethnic Nepali population in southern Bhutan remains and that the government continues to withhold No Objection Certificates (NOCs) from some of these people. NOCs are a form of security clearance needed to receive government jobs or education past the 10th grade level. Chhetri said that "you must be very clean, with no (family) connection to the camps in Nepal, to get an NOC." When Econoff questioned MFA's Tenzin about the denial of NOCs, he privately acknowledged it was an unfortunate circumstance of the refugee problem, that it was discriminatory, and that the RGOB would have to work to correct this problem.

RGOB-GON Meeting: Will It Ever Happen?

18. (C) Poloff informed the MFA that Nepalese Foreign Minister Ramesh Nath Pandey is open to discussing the refugee issue with Foreign Minister Wangchuk, possibly on the margins of SAARC or UNGA, if the RGOB requests the meeting. The MFA responded that they had not heard this and would forward the request to the Foreign Minister. (Note: Polcouns delivered this message to Bhutanese Ambassador Tshering in New Delhi on July 13 (Ref A) and it appears the message did not make it to the official to whom we spoke with in Thimphu. End Note.) Under Secretary Wangchuk expressed doubt that such a meeting could take place at UNGA, signaling that the RGOB would be occupied with other "very important items," such as UN reforms, the Millennium Summit and energy issues. He indicated that if the GON requests the meeting, and time permits, it was possible. (Comment: Do not hold your breath. End Comment.)

19. (C) Tenzin suggested the meeting should not be at the Foreign Minister level, but between Kings at the next SAARC summit schedule for November 2005. He noted that the Nepalese ambassador in India has repeatedly asked for meetings with the King to discuss the issue, but had been rebuffed.

Comment: Time to Move On

10. (C) The Bhutanese Refugee problem has dragged on for close to 15 years. Although the RGOB has repeatedly stated its commitment to repatriate bona fide Bhutanese citizens, it has consistently stalled the process. Political instability and the lack of security in Nepal have recently compounded the problem and made the likelihood of a bilateral solution

even more remote.

11. (C) Attempts to use a "carrot and the stick" approach to resolving this problem will not be successful. The countries with a financial presence in Bhutan (India, Denmark, Switzerland and Austria) that could force RGOB action through withdrawal of aid or cancellations of loans have not shown a willingness to do so. Although the GOI publicly states it is pressing the two sides to find a solution, New Delhi will be wary of anything that could give rise to another neighbor with a Maoist insurgency, or active terrorist network working against it. In the Bhutanese mind, there is no incentive worth risking the importation of large number of possible dissidents or Maoist sympathizers. The RGOB fear of Maoist infiltration of the camps, whether real or perceived, has completely colored their judgment.

12. (C) Bhutan views the refugee issue as an extension of a much larger issue, that of being a tiny Buddhist country sandwiched between the giants of China and India. The Bhutanese have a very real fear of being swallowed up by one of the two and recent history supports their case. China's invasion of Tibet and India's annexation of Sikkim weigh heavily on the Bhutanese conscience. Rinchenn noted there remains widespread fear in the government and the population that, without very careful planning, Bhutan will eventually be seized by one of its neighbors.

13. (C) There is no excuse for the actions that the RGOB undertook in the early 1990s. Expelling its own citizens was wrong and that message should be made clear. However, it is time to admit that it is very unlikely that a large portion of the refugees will ever return to Bhutan. Even if the Category 1's from all of the camps are repatriated, the number would only be about 2,500 (extrapolating the number of Category 1's from Khudunabari to overall number of refugees). Even if that number is doubled, it still represents only a small fraction of refugees, currently languishing in the camps, that may ever reach Bhutan. It is time to focus on other solutions. UNDP's Dessallien agreed that that third country resettlement is the correct option. The Australian Embassy informed us that they are currently making plans for a large scale resettlement program for the Bhutanese refugees, if the political will for such an endeavor arises. It is time to focus our efforts on third country resettlement, giving relief to the refugees, acknowledging Bhutan's security fears and closing the book on this saga.

14. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website:
(<http://www.state.sgov/p/sa/newdelhi>)
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